QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

PROJECT PLANNING

Project Management is the process of planning, organizing, and managing tasks and resources to accomplish a defined objective within specific time frames. It includes several phases including planning, implementation, closure and outcome assessment. The success of a project depends on the effort, care, and skill applied in its planning, making project planning a crucial part of the overall project management process.

During project planning, the project planner determines: how the project will be done; who is responsible for implementation; time frames; and how available resources will be used. Without proper planning, a number of negative consequences may occur such as work being overlooked, unnecessary work being done, project benefits not reaching expectations, and unnecessary delays.

PLANNING PROCESS

To carry out the project planning process, a number of factors must be considered. Following is a brief overview of steps that must be taken to construct a project plan.

Identify Project Goals and Objectives: Project goals and objectives are statements that describe what the project will accomplish. Goals are high level statements that provide overall context for what the project is trying to achieve. Project goals should align to the local child support agency's overall business goals. Objectives are lower level statements that describe the specific, tangible products and deliverables that will be achieved as a result of the project's implementation.

Identification of project goals and objectives includes: naming the project; stating the project's overall purpose in one or two sentences; and stating the end results (i.e., what will be achieved at the completion of the project).

Identify Project Deliverables: A deliverable is the product which will be developed, or the activity which will be completed, in order to implement the project. As part of this process, the planner should distinguish between deliverables which are necessary to achieve the purpose of the project and those which are merely desirable.

Establish the Project's Parameters: Project parameters are the boundaries and limitations which establish the general framework of the project. Establishing parameters includes identifying the project time frame and the overall resources to be devoted to the project (e.g., funding, staffing, etc.).

Establish Project Milestones: Milestones are points in the project at which major work products are completed. Milestones indicate progress toward completion of the overall project, and may include completion or achievement of the project's interim targets. Milestones indicate significant progress points and assist in keeping the project on track. To set project milestones, the planner must identify all important points at which significant work products will be completed during the project.

Identify Activities and Tasks: Activities or tasks are the individual steps which will be implemented during the project. Activities must be clearly defined, and should be measurable to ensure that anyone can determine if a particular activity is in progress, or completed. To complete this step, the planner should develop a project schedule inserting activities between milestones, and assign responsibility for completion of all activities or tasks to managers or staff as appropriate. Regular updates of management and appropriate management oversight should be incorporated into the plan.

Estimate time and costs: In order to plan a project, an estimate of time and costs must be identified. Team members who are fully knowledgeable about the project, who know and understand the costs involved, and who will be involved in the implementation of the project should participate in this portion of the planning.

Solicit Input: A draft of the project plan should be distributed to all essential individuals who will be involved in the project's implementation for their review and analysis, as well as appropriate management staff. Carefully consider any input they provide regarding the plan.

TOOLS
As mentioned above, there are many tools available for carrying out project planning. The most commonly used tool is the Gantt Chart.

Gantt Charts are useful tools for analyzing and planning more complex projects. They assist in planning tasks that need to be completed, provide a basis for scheduling when these tasks will be carried out, allow for planning the allocation of resources needed to complete the project, and help work out the *critical path** for a project when it must be completed by a particular date. When a project is under way, Gantt charts help monitor whether the project is on schedule.

* The *critical path* is the sequence of activities that must be completed on schedule for the entire project to be completed on schedule. If an activity on the critical path is delayed by one day, the entire project will be delayed by one day (unless another activity on the critical path can be accelerated by one day).

PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

(PROJECT PLAN SAMPLE)

An example of a project planning process follows. The sample illustrates a planning process that an local child support agency (LCSA) might use to plan for a performance improvement project as part of the preparation of its Quality Assurance and Performance Improvement (QAPI) plan. LCSAs are encouraged to use the process shown in this example during their project planning phase for both QAPI planning purposes and any other instances in which project planning is required.

BLOCK CASE REVIEW

An LCSA plans to implement a project to improve its performance in the Collections on Current Support and Cases with Payments on Arrears performance measures. In addition, the LCSA has identified that there may be issues with the quality of case data in its system. To address these issues, the LCSA has determined that a block review of all cases within its caseload is necessary.

The LCSA QAPI Coordinator has been given the assignment of planning the block review and taking the lead in the implementation of the review. Planning the review consists of meeting with LCSA management and staff as necessary, and developing a plan which identifies the following:

PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Title: BLOCK CASE REVIEW

Goal: The following goals are established for the review: (1) improve performance in collections on current support and cases with arrears collections; (2) ensure overall program compliance and passage of the quarterly compliance reviews; (3) ensure case files are properly organized and include all appropriate documentation; and (4) ensure cases are as error-free as possible in preparation for the LCSA's upcoming conversion to a new automated system.

Objective: The objective is to complete a review of the total caseload within a six-month period, beginning January 1, 2005, and ending June 30, 2005; take any appropriate enforcement or establishment action on cases that are reviewed; organize all case files; and correct any "correctible" errors found in the automated system during the process.

PROJECT DELIVERABLES

To ensure the effective management of the project, the following products will be utilized:

- A list is to be produced, at the beginning of the project, showing all cases grouped by assigned case manager and case management unit. This will become a schedule and check list for case managers and supervisors to use to ensure that the review is completed within the six month time-frame. This list will be updated monthly as cases are reviewed.

- Other lists may be produced, showing categories of cases needing priority attention in the review, such as those with known assets or employment, but no collection. The review of these cases will be prioritized to ensure that necessary enforcement actions are taken on them first.

- A form will be provided, which case managers will use to record and report the completion of the review of each case and any necessary action taken.

- A report will be compiled and submitted to the QAPI Coordinator by each unit supervisor on the fifth of each month, summarizing the past month's accomplishments made toward completing the block review. The first report is to be submitted by February 5, 2005, and the last report July 5, 2005. As part of the reporting process, monthly updates will be provided to the LCSA managers, the executive management team, and the LCSA director.

- Monthly performance reports and quarterly compliance review reports will be analyzed to determine the impact of the project on performance and compliance.

PROJECT PARAMETERS

- The project will include a review of all cases in the caseload, regardless of whether a support order has been established.

- The project will begin on January 1 and be completed on June 30, 2005, plus time for necessary follow up and reporting.

- Based on the success of the project and available resources, future block reviews may be implemented.

PROJECT MILESTONES

- It is anticipated that approximately one-sixth of the total cases will be reviewed each month, taking the normal attrition of cases in the caseload into consideration.

- An inventory will be taken at the end of the project period to ensure all cases have been reviewed and appropriate enforcement actions taken.

- A project wrap-up meeting will be held with the QAPI Coordinator briefing LCSA management staff on the final project results.

ACTIVITIES AND TASKS

- A staff training session will be held in December 2004, during which the objectives of the project and procedures for the review of cases and implementation of follow-up actions will be discussed.

- At the beginning of each month of the project, unit supervisors will meet with their case managers to review accomplishments and provide updated lists.

- Case managers, in consultation with their supervisors and depending on their work schedules, will identify a time period each week, during which they will conduct the review of their cases.

- Case managers will review each case using the provided recording form and submit the completed forms to their supervisors on a weekly basis. Follow-up case action will be handled on a priority basis, and will be carried out as the individual cases are reviewed.

- Supervisors will batch the forms and deliver them to the QAPI Coordinator on a weekly basis.

- The QAPI Coordinator will compile project status information and submit this information to LCSA management staff for review and feedback on the 10th of each month.

PROJECT TIME AND COSTS

- The case review process will be completed within the six month time-frame, and follow-up case enforcement action on individual cases will be initiated as the reviews of those cases are completed. It is likely that the

completion of enforcement actions will occur after the June 30, 2005 project end-date for a number of cases.

- No extra costs are associated with the review as staff will incorporate the review into their ongoing case management activities.

Upon completion of the project plan, the QAPI Coordinator will submit the plan for review by appropriate LCSA management and staff. Once the plan is approved, the Coordinator will be responsible for monitoring project implementation and reporting to LCSA management on its status and overall success.